

Testimony of Linda Powell  
To the Policy Committee  
Of the White House Conference on Aging  
A Consumer's Perspective of Barriers to Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services and  
Solutions  
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My name is Linda Powell. I am a representative of the Older Adult Consumer Mental Health Alliance (OACMHA) to the National Coalition on Mental Health and Aging. I am a long time mental health consumer advocate having served as OACMHA's first Executive Director. OACMHA is the only national consumer run advocacy organization working on behalf of older adults with mental illness.

I am also the primary caregiver for my 84-year-old father who is disabled due a stroke, has dementia and suffers greatly from depression. I know first hand the problems faced by millions of other Americans who are trying to find services that will address the mental health needs of their older loved ones.

The stigma of seeking traditional mental health services is overwhelming for many of today's older adults. We have to remember, this is a strong, proud generation that pulled this country through a depression and a "war to end all wars". They were taught to do for themselves and not look to others for help. Now so many of them face a battle they cannot win by themselves and this is often a bitter pill to swallow. For that reason, a national anti-stigma campaign must be launched and include a special emphasis on reaching older adults with mental and cognitive disorders. Too often in America, the media portray older adults as those having a great afternoon on the golf course or those tied to chairs in long term care facilities. The lives of those who struggle with mental disorders but are somehow able to find services and begin the work of recovery are seldom portrayed on television or in the movies. A strong, national anti-stigma campaign that brought together organizations like those represented here today, with media savvy professionals could make a huge difference in the lives of many people across the country.

These remarkable people, who really formed the backbone of this country, should be revered and seen as national treasures and respected elders, but when it comes to mental health issues they are invisible to far too many. If mental health services and issues for older adults are not designated as a priority for the public mental health and substance abuse system and the White House Conference on Aging this group will once more be pushed aside. Children gained this status many years ago, it is now long overdue for older adults to benefit from this designation.

You have read the statistics, 20% of older adults suffer from some debilitating form of mental or cognitive disorder. Older adults have the highest suicide rate of any age group. To me this is just unacceptable. I fight the fight every day to keep my father engaged in life, but it is a battle that takes it toll on my family and me just as it does on millions of other families across this country. I have been a mental health advocate for many years. I know how to work the system and still I struggle. Think about those people who have never had to advocate for

anything before. It is a daunting task. Add the stigma of mental illness to all that and many people just give up.

Please don't give up on these people and their families. Make mental health and substance abuse concerns a top priority for the 2005 White House Conference on Aging.

Thank you.